

3-16-17
Dear House Education Reform Committee Members:

I appreciate your taking the time to consider this letter regarding HB 4163. I am currently finishing my 20th year of teaching and am pleased to tell you that I enjoy working with the students, parents, and colleagues of my program as much as I did when I first began. Teaching is a great profession, as it allows educators to witness student learning and provides an opportunity to help these future leaders develop into their full-potential.

In addition to teaching, I have served on the Statewide Michigan School Band and Orchestra Association's Music Education Committee for five years, served as a curriculum editor for the Michigan Arts Education Instruction and Assessment (MAEIA) program, been a member of the American School Band Directors Association, served on the Negotiating Team in Haslett for the past eight years, and am now serving as Chief Negotiator and Haslett Education Association President for the past year and a half.

In this state there has been a gradual restriction of local control in terms of curriculum, calendar (Labor Day law), professional development and much more. However, there have been times where there has been a release back to local control. An example of this would be the allowance of a waiver for districts that would like to start school before Labor Day. Many districts, including Haslett Public Schools, were able to respond to what was best for the students and families within their community.

In Haslett, we are a high-performing district that is doing more with the lowest level of state funding offered. Our teachers are dedicated professionals and our Education Association has enjoyed a positive and collaborative relationship with both our Board of Education and administration. Simply put, we use the collective bargaining process to work together and solve issues within our district.

One such example of a problem that we solved collectively is the schedule for our 9-12 building during their exams. Over the past twenty years, we had a final exam schedule that did not allow for half days. Students would have a review period of an hour and an exam block that was over two hours, twice per day, over three days. Students and teachers alike found that this was not the best educational practice, as the exam blocks were longer than what most undergraduate college students would endure and the study period encouraged students to cram just before the test. We started out with the collective bargaining process in December and worked until June to not only settle a contract, but also to work through this final exam issue. With the dedication of all parties involved, we were able to create a schedule that is much more student-centered. Half days came to Haslett at the 9-12 level this year and have allowed students the time needed to finalize their preparation for the next set of exams, as well as teachers the time to process the data from the exams and begin preparing student growth reports. This schedule was also much more of a collegiate model which should provide a better preparation and focus for students for their exams..

There are many other examples of how the Collective Bargaining Process can be used for the betterment of a district, but if HB 4163 were in place, we would have been unable to discuss our situation at the table and work through the discomfort on both sides to resolve this issue for our 9-12 grade students. It is better for a decision to be made collaboratively versus a top-down style of leadership.

I would greatly prefer to give testimony directly to the committee, describe to you the great potential in negotiation of a calendar and answer your questions. The challenges in front of us today in education should be solved with conversations that are held between policy makers and educators, not special interests and those that lack experience of educating tomorrow's leaders. If you were to hold your committee meetings at 4pm, I believe you would have better conversations, as there are many educators that would love to attend but have classrooms full of children to teach and great difficulty finding substitutes.

As an educator that is nearer to retirement than the start of my career, I am also concerned that the continued efforts to narrow the scope of collective bargaining is not only detrimental to finding the solutions to the problems within each local community, but also to the attractiveness of our profession and ability to find the best and brightest to replace the multitude of educators that are set to retire. As a trend, I'm certain you are aware, there has been a sharp decrease in the enrollment in teacher education programs. As an example, according to "The Title II Report", the following is a count of individuals enrolled, which includes all individuals that have been admitted to a teacher preparation program, but have not yet completed the program in the academic year being reported:

In 2008-09 there were 23,372 individuals enrolled in a teacher preparation program, compared to 11,287 individuals in 2013-14. (https://title2.ed.gov/Public/Report/StateHighlights/StateHighlights.aspx?p=2_01)

There are various reasons why, to be certain; however, salary, benefits, autonomy, and the lack of respect given to the profession seem to have an impact from the various conversations and surveys that I've seen. The elimination of calendar and schedule from collective bargaining would allow decisions to be made without all parties involved being invited to the table. This means that there is a great potential to not only make this important decision without the involvement of educators, but also to make it possible to add hours, days, or a scheduling mechanism in place that can increase the workload and time spent by the professionals without the power to negotiate compensation for additional time. Because education is such an important part of what we do as a society, it is imperative that we recruit high quality professionals to the field. However, in order to do this, we must trust their professionalism and the courage provided for all to work to a mutual agreement through the collective bargaining process.

In closing, I encourage you to let HB 4163 rest in committee.

Thank you for your time.

David H. Gott

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